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Meskerem Shiferaw

SNV- Netherlands Development Organization, mesksh2002@yahoo.com

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**STATUS OF  
LOCAL GOVERNANCE  
AT  
WOREDA/DISTRICT LEVEL IN ETHIOPIA**

**By Meskerem Shiferaw**

**May, 2007**

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***PERSON(S) SUBMITTING PROPOSAL/REQUESTING INFORMATION:***

**Name: Ms. Meskerem Shiferaw, Local Governance Advisor**

**Organization: SNV- Netherlands Development Organization**

**Address: P.O.Box 100301**

**City; Addis Abeba,**

**Country: Ethiopia**

**Telephone 251 1 911 649524**

**FAX Number 2511 14 654386**

**E-Mail: mesksh2002@yahoo.com**

**Attn: Professor Sisay Asefa**

**Center for African Development Policy Research (CADPR)**

## **STATUS OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE AT WOREDA/DISTRICT LEVEL IN ETHIOPIA**

### ***Abstract***

In Ethiopia, about 50% of the population lives below poverty line. Efforts have been exerted to reverse the situation both by Government and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs); so far however solid results have not been achieved as expected. The question of “what has gone wrong?” has been coiling around in the minds of development practitioners. The international communities point their fingers at poor governance, corruption, internal and regional conflicts for the underdevelopment of the country. It was the outcome of these kinds of questions along with suggestions made that brought about the idea of promoting good governance in developing countries. The government of Ethiopia in its Five-Year Plan, Sustainable Development to End Poverty (PASDEP), accentuated the promotion of improved democratic governance, decentralization and reform of the justice system. It is the urge for good governance that inspired me to analyze the situation at the local level; districts/Woredas in Ethiopia. Therefore, this paper’s aim is to unravel the hidden importance of Governance as an engine of change in improving dire economic situation at the local level. To this end, the paper will assess the role of Local Authorities, Civil Service Organizations (CSOs) in relation with community development.

The paper will also touch upon, but is not limited to, policies and legal frameworks that are related to local development. To expand on this paper pertinent literatures and discussions with local actors are used.

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is written for the 4th International Conference on Ethiopian Development Studies (4th ICEDS), the challenges of peace and development in Ethiopia & the horn of Africa, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, USA. The conference will be held in Kalamazoo, USA from August 2-4, 2007.

The paper will touch upon policies and strategies that support the decentralization process in strengthening the local governance. It also assesses the structure from the federal up to the Woreda level, the mandate given to the Woredas, the realities on the ground, the challenges faced while trying to implement the policies.

The evaluation in this paper will mainly depend on certain elements of good governance such as rule of law, participation, accountability, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to address all elements of good governance to the local realities.

## **2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The overall objective of writing this paper is to briefly see how the governance system is working at local levels, to assess the opportunities like policies and strategies, strengths and weaknesses for further studies.

## **3 METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of making the paper as short as possible; based on the requirement of WMU, the study focuses mainly on secondary data and discussion with communities (no questionnaires developed and deeper analysis done) during field visits and workshops.

## **4 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

The paper lacks deeper analysis and concentrates on the experience of a number of Woredas/districts. While writing this paper, it is assumed that all Woredas have more or less the same status in implementing policies and strategies. However, it should be noted that some of the Woredas are better than others in their development level, capacity in implementing policies and strategies. For example Afar, Somalia, Benishangul and Gambella are emerging regions unlike the other bigger regions. Nevertheless, in this paper they are assumed to have the same ability in implementing policies since devolution of power is almost new to all.

## **5 MAJOR POLICIES THAT HAVE EFFECT ON THE LOCAL GOVERNANCE**

Policies and strategies have been formulated to facilitate the devolution of power down to the lowest units of government. Some of the most important documents that elaborate the decentralization process/devolution of power are:

- **The constitution of the country**
  - The country's constitution that was adopted in 1994, clearly indicates that:
    - Rule of law will be respected and that development at each level of government (federal, regional, zonal and woreda/district) will be guaranteed. While trying to achieve development, it is indicated that the rights of citizens would be respected.
    - Functions of government at all levels shall be transparent and officials shall be accountable to the people. If these are not fulfilled by elected representatives or officials they shall be questioned and proper action will be taken.
    - It is reflected that adequate power/devolution shall be granted to the woredas as center of development so that the communities participate in the development of their vicinity. For the details on the state powers refer to the constitution.



- **Plan for Accelerated and Sustainable Development to End Poverty (PASDEP).**

- This document is a guiding strategic framework for the period covering 2005/2006-2009/10. It is the continuation/second phase of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Program (PRSP) which was partly implemented between 2002 and 2005. In the PASDEP, it is indicated that Civil Service Reform, Justice System reform, improved democratic governance and decentralization would be strengthened in the coming 5 years. Detailed information is available in the document.

- **Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI)**

- PASDEP, reflects that the ADLI strategy will be pursued focusing on the private initiative of farmers and shift to diversification and commercialization of agriculture. To implement this strategy, the government will give support to the democratization process and to Woreda/district level capacity building.

- **Decentralization**

- There were two generations of decentralization of power in Ethiopia. The first was decentralization of powers and functions of the state to autonomous regional governments while the second generation involves shifting decision-making closer to the people at the

woreda level in a more comprehensive and concerted program known as District level decentralization program.

- This paper deals with the second generation decentralization
- Devolution of power to the regional governments and Woredas in implementing the economic policies and development programs would continue by assessing the

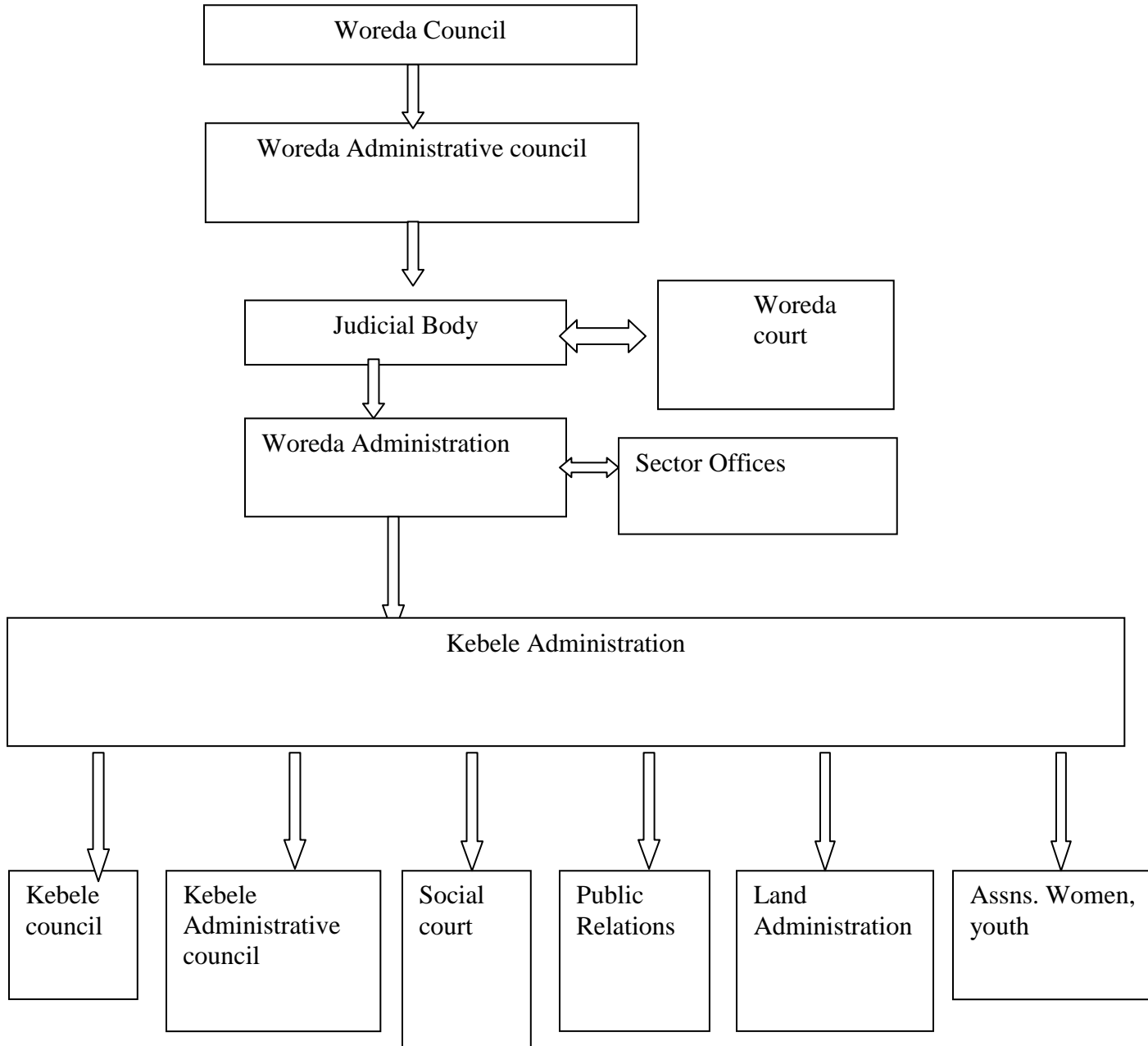
needs and providing capacity building trainings at the lowest level. To strengthen the Woredas resource base, regions are sending block grants to woredas so that they will be able to decide on expenditures for priority areas.

## **6 STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION/MANDATE OF THE WOREDA**

As it is indicated above, the policies and strategies implemented by the government support the devolution of power from the center to the regions and from regions to Woredas. If the devolution of power is properly executed, there would be full participation of people in the development processes from inception of ideas to planning, approval of projects, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Transparency of government representatives towards their constituencies and accountability to their deeds is expected.

Later in the paper whether the policies, strategies, and what is put in the constitution is being implemented or not, on the ground, will be discussed. To this end, the structure and mandates of the Woredas are indicated below.

## 7 THE STRUCTURE OF THE *WOREDA* ADMINISTRATION



## **8 MANDATE OF THE WOREDA ADMINISTRATION**

The Woredas being centers of socio-economic development have the following mandates.

- The Woreda councils:
  - Implements policies, laws, regulations, directives, plans and programs initiated and formulated by both the federal and regional states throughout the Woredas.
  - Examines and approves the draft economic development, social services along with administrative working plans and programs of the Woredas.
- The Woreda administrations:
  - Prepare plans within the framework of the regional plan.
  - The Woreda prepares and approves its own budget and sends it to the regions.
  - Receive block grants from regions and allocates it to sectoral offices through Bureau of Finance and Economic Development.

## 9 GOVERNANCE SITUATION IN THE WOREDAS

Before going into what is happening in the Woredas, **what** is the accepted definition of local governance related to development? As mentioned in the Journal of Human Development, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2007, there is no consensus of local governance definition. For the purpose of this paper the definition given by SNV, Netherlands Development Organization is taken. SNV defines local governance as: A system that links the two processes of democratization and decentralization at the sub-national/district level. It involves local stakeholders interacting to determine the local development agenda and to manage resources for implementing their development **priorities**; it also involves NGOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), the private sector and local institutions, local elected government, de-concentrated government, which entails delegating some implementation responsibilities to local officers.

In the Human Development Journal as well, it is stressed that governance is a co-governance between the Government, Civil Society Organizations and the private sectors. It includes dynamism, diversity and intentionality.

After having seen the policies, strategies, structures and mandates of Woredas and working definition of local governance related with development, it opens a path to examine how local governments are operating in the Woredas/districts of Ethiopia. It also assesses challenges faced at each good governance elements during implementation.

Written for the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Ethiopian studies, organized by Western Michigan University, August 2007

The parameters used to examine the Local Governance/good governance in this paper are limited to Rule of Law, participation and accountability, transparency, efficiency and effectiveness.

## **9.1 RULE OF LAW**

It is understandable that the existence of properly set rule of law is a backbone to effective functioning of a country. Good governance, democracy and protection of human rights could only be reached if and only if independent and effective Judiciary system along with skilled manpower; law makers, judges and police forces are put in place.

### **○ REALITIES ON THE GROUND**

At the Woreda level there are courts (though not fully equipped with sufficient number of skilled manpower) to serve the population to the required quality compared to the number of cases received.

At the Kebele level however full time personnel/judges who are supposed to look at cases do not exist. The judges come to the social courts twice a week. They are elected by the committees in the Kebele where they are not paid for their services. Even for the two days they are assigned for, there is no guarantee that they will show up or if they do, it might not be on time since they have other duties of their own like farming or other petty trade. The judges don't have proper training; possibly a couple of day's worth of seminar focusing on major issues. They serve the Kebele community for 4 years until next election comes.

Regarding the police force in the Woredas and Kebeles, they are few in number and the necessary equipment to work with is not in place. This hinders them from carrying out their responsibilities fully. Due to lack of budget for transporting those hurt the police are facing problems and cannot particularly help those that need the help most (the poorest of the poor) in kebeles. On the other hand, those that are better-off financially however, cover their own costs.

There are also local militias assigned to assist the police that are elected by communities. Their main duty is preventing people living in communities from committing crimes though they have no mandate to arrest or detain individuals.

Due to the shortage of the required and skilled manpower in the judiciary system, dependency on each other; kebele social court on Woreda court and Woreda courts on regional courts seems inevitable negating the devolution of power.

### **9.3 PARTICIPATION**

The communities in the Woredas have the right to participate in every step of development starting from problem identification, inception of ideas, planning, and approval of projects, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. If so then working together could have built their capacities at grass roots level and inculcated ownership.

#### **○ The Reality on the ground**



- The communities at Woreda level are not fully participating in the development of their own vicinity. They are not fully informed of what the Woreda administration is planning or doing rather in some places they watch all the development endeavors of the Woredas. Administrators often notify the communities the plans developed in offices without consulting them during the planning process. They call upon the people to ask them to contribute in terms of labor, local materials or cash to implement the woredas plan. Due to this situation, even if the government calls meetings they are not ready to participate in discussions. In addition, sometimes people might not attend the meetings because of the biased idea that the government will not consider their opinions. They prefer to keep quiet particularly for issues related to politics and governance. Some of the reasons for not participating fully could be the non- responsiveness of the representatives for most pressing issues like construction of feeder roads, digging water wells, construction of schools closer to their villages etc., In this case, if the representatives have informed the communities that there was shortage of funding, they would have understood the situation.
- The government representatives on the other hand, are of the idea that the main problem of under development in the area could be due to the existence of large numbers of holidays in a month which hampers the farmers from contributing to the development of their areas. Hence, trying to change the attitudes of the farmers and the community at large about working on religious holidays does not seem feasible. However, the communities argue that they have

sufficient time for work in relation to the small land holding they have for themselves and their families.

#### ○ **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION**

Women working in government offices and NGOS are few in number and even if they are employed they are low paid since in most cases they are not as educated as men. Even though the policy of the government support improvement on the situation of women, there still remains more to be done right from childhood till maturity.

Women's participation is also very much limited due to cultural and attitude problems which hinders them from talking in public about their problems. Instead of women directly speaking about their problems, the men are speaking on their behalf particularly in big meetings and courts. Other problems, though improving bit by bit (due to women's associations) include; early marriage, rape, abduction and violence against women. The problems mentioned above coupled with traditions have hampered women from having access to and control over resources.

#### ○ **PARTICIPATION OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY**

Civil Society here is defined as CBOs, NGOs (local and international) and other formal and informal groupings such as women and youth associations.

There are also cooperatives that are giving services to farmers. Both NGOs and cooperatives have to have permission from the government. Permission for NGOs to work in certain areas takes some time; every now and then they might not be able to get permission depending on the areas of intervention and location they are selecting.

CBOs including Idirs, Iquibs and Debos. are temporary gatherings of people which do not require licenses though the aim of the grouping differs. Iqub is sort of forced saving, while Debo is when farmers come together to assist each other at the time of farming and harvesting and Idir is for funeral. Nowadays, the government is using Idirs to mobilize communities for meetings. Idirs are the most popular form of community gathering. They are liked by the communities because:

- Leaders are elected by the members
- It reaches the community at time of major problem; death.
- It is transparent, accountable and responsive
- There is free flow of information between the leaders and the community
- Simple and flexible in terms of giving money or buying materials for funeral.
- They are effective and efficient.
- Legitimate in a sense that there are rules and regulations that governs the leaders and the members

The communities prefer NGOs instead of government organizations since NGOs give them the opportunity to prioritize their problems. Often

times they also provide them with material assistance and group credits, particularly to the vulnerable groups; women

Youth and women associations these days are liked by the community. These associations act like community facilitators in various issues like HIV/AIDS, violence against women, informing the community about epidemics, writing letters to NGOs and GOs for simple requests like funding for projects ( whether it is approved or not ).

#### ○ **PLANNING AND BUDGETING**

The Kebele leaders in each Woreda work out the kebeles plans and send them to the Woredas. The Plans are consolidated by the Woreda administration. The consolidated plans are then sent to regions. It should be noted here that the communities don't participate in setting priorities. Hence, transparency and accountability lacking

To conclude on participation, it should be understood that the government is not the only vital organ that improves local governance with

regard to participation but all the actors working in the Woredas; Civil Service organizations and private organizations undertaking development work. It should be noted here that CSOs involve the communities in prioritizing problems, plans, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of projects.

### **9.3 ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY**

As mentioned earlier, in most Woredas, there is no transparency or open discussion on issues affecting the communities. It is observed that there are no information flows between different communities due to fear and suspicion. As it is also indicated above, the communities are not participating in identification of problems, prioritizing and planning except in the case of CSOs. Lack of transparency therefore, prohibits the people from demanding their rights and working on activities that they are accountable for. This blocks the society from making the representatives responsible for their deeds and actions as well. This also has a negative implication on monitoring and evaluation of the society's resources which might give way for corruption and misappropriation of scarce resources. On the other hand, the communities could have been accountable for not availing community contribution, monitoring project construction materials and works (Quality focus) and managing construction if agreement has been reached earlier on or if participation took place from the beginning.

### **9.4 EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY**

Government and Non-Government offices are expected to be effective and efficient in terms of utilizing the society's scarce resources and timely completion of duties and discharging responsibilities. To perform accordingly, a nationwide Civil Service Reform has taken place.

- **What is the reality on the ground?**

In government offices, the Civil Service Reform is being implemented. The steps taken include posting the good governance principles/elements such as accountability, transparency, rule of law etc..., on their walls or in visible places so that the staff members are aware of what is expected from them and guests know where to go and to whom to talk to. There was great expectation that the civil service reform program would bring total effectiveness and efficiency in the day to day work of the staff members. However, when it came to implementation, there were problems like shortage of expertise, funding and transparency in the procedures applied.

The other major problem being faced staff members in government offices are, the way activities of each individual are translated/broken down

creating subjectivity in individual performance evaluation. There is a minimum standard/score set where most employees fall. In reality all or most people don't perform the same way, however frameworks given to responsible personnel from higher authorities dictate the process.

This and the gimgema/face-to-face evaluations are frustrating most employees who know they are performing better than others. There is an indication that some responsible personnel are using the scoring for revenge causing experienced people to leave the organization. These problems, coupled with:

- The unbearable working environment like absence of habitable houses for employees who are transferred from zones and regions and lack of light, water, schools for their children and for themselves weakened by the deficiency in the number of skilled managers and administrators is creating frustration between employees.
- There is no information flow and transparency in what is going on and the absence of complaint mechanisms in some organizations hampers accountability from both sides.
- Inefficient utilization of resources.
- It is observed that there is deviation from what is planned and what is being implemented which creates mistrust between managers and employees.

In general, the above situations diminish the efficacy of the civil service system in promoting good governance and participatory development. Nonetheless, it should be noted that some changes have been seen in some organizations after the implementation of the Civil Service Reform.

## 10 CONCLUSIONS

As can be seen from this paper, there are some improvements observed in the local governance level after policies and strategies have been put in place even though they are not complete. The Woredas administration still needs to be capacitated at almost all levels in order to execute their responsibilities effectively and efficiently. In addition to the capacity problem, it seems that there is lack of commitment to facilitate the implementation of good governance. To overcome this, trust between government and communities should be there.

The decentralization process which is new to Ethiopia is facing problems like the unwillingness of skilled manpower to go the Woredas due to lack of proper infrastructures like roads, schools for employees and their family and institutional capacity. Consequently, the introduction of the Civil Service Reform and good governance elements still need better implementation capacity and the required manpower.

Though noticeable improvements have been achieved, there appears to be problems encountered by the communities. The following are some of the problems observed while implementing policies and strategies.

- Lack of participatory planning due to the exclusion of the communities right from the design stage of planning up to implementation which otherwise could have inculcated ownership



of the programs and projects. It should also be noted that the participation of women and children are lower or non-existent.

- Inefficient/ineffective provision of public/social services like health, education etc., in which case people have to travel long distances to get the proper medication even if health posts exist in the areas. Sometimes, the health professionals are absent or the medication is not there. Children also travel to long distances or stay far from their parents particularly for secondary schools. This is causing problems especially for female students.
  - Lack of transparency and accountability is making the people living in the community skeptical.
  - In the Civil Service Reform, though there are administrative manuals for promoting or dismissing employees, the staff members are not clearly informed. Which results in the lack of trust towards representative and the commitment from staff is also not there.
- 
- Shortages of human and material resources are affecting the development of the areas. Unless this is taken seriously by the government, the turnover problem in government offices will continue.

Finally, it should be noted that arriving at good governance at any level is unattainable unless there is interaction between all stakeholders to

successfully implement the development agenda of any area be it government, Civil Society Organizations or the private sector projects or programs.

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